

October 17, 2016 | By Nancy Murphy

# Elections—and our duty to participate—are critical to a functioning democracy, explains Stanford expert



This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016**, a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

*Do we have a duty to vote? Is that shared sense of responsibility eroding? What's at stake if Americans don't turn out on election day? Emilee Chapman, assistant professor of political science at Stanford University, examines the ethics of voting.*

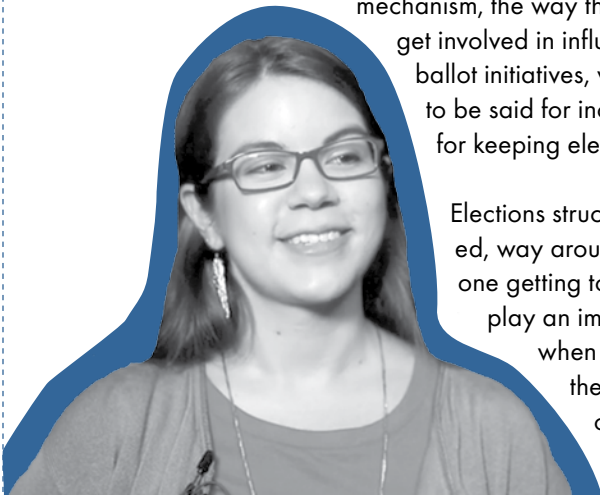
To explore the ethics of voting—and how that's evolved over time—Worldview Stanford interviewed Emilee Chapman, assistant professor of political science at Stanford University. Chapman is also affiliated with the Center for Ethics and Society. Her current research focuses on the theory of democracy and the role of voting: What makes it interesting, important, and unique as a form of participation, and why do we spend so much time and energy caring about whether people vote?

## **Let's start out with the big picture. What role do elections play and how important are they to our democracy?**

There are a lot of traditional arguments for why elections are important. Elections enable the peaceful transfer of power and the selection of leaders who are going to govern in a way that's responsible to the people. Elections also allow citizens to remove a bad or potentially tyrannical leader from office. These are still very important functions that elections play.

There are other ways that we could select our leaders. We might have them appointed by a panel of experts. We could select them at random from among the population using a lottery mechanism, the way that we select jurors. On the other hand, we might want people to get involved in influencing decisions more directly through petitioning, lobbying, or ballot initiatives, which might put less emphasis on elections. I do think there's a lot to be said for increasing participation, but at the same time there's a lot to be said for keeping elections at the heart of our democratic practice.

Elections structure our political culture in a really valuable, sometimes underrated, way around special moments of mass participation, where we have everyone getting together and making a single, concrete decision. These moments play an important role in socializing people as to the role of the citizen. Even when we fall short of expectations, these moments help people to see themselves as political actors and send a signal that we value everyone's voice, that we think of democracy as a form of government in which all citizens have a role to play. Elections make that visible and formal.



Elections also provide a forum for public conversations that we wouldn't necessarily be able to have if we were focused more on particular issues or day-to-day decisions. They allow us to have broad conversations about the kinds of values and principles that ought to guide our public life and about the trade-offs that we might have to make between different sorts of issues.

The expectation that everyone is going to participate in elections also creates a captive audience for activists and political leaders who can make claims and suggestions about political possibilities, who we are as a people, and what we want to do. Elections provide news outlets and different groups an incentive to get political information to the people, and that enables us to understand more about what our government is doing. This is essential in a democracy.

**Given the enduring importance of elections, do we have an ethical duty as citizens to vote? Has that perception changed over time?**

The duty to vote comes from all those special features of elections that make them unique. People can't just vote when they feel like it or when they're particularly interested in an election, or we'll lose that shared belief that these are decisions and issues that everyone will participate in. It's a collective action; we all have to contribute to this public good.

Interestingly, belief in the duty to vote hasn't really fallen as much as turnout rates have. As recently as 2007, the Pew Center found that over 90% of Americans that they surveyed agreed with the statement, "There is a duty to vote." While that sentiment has declined some since the '50s and early '60s, it's also been accompanied by a rising belief in the legitimacy of other forms of political actions like protests. The duty to vote is lower among younger generations around the world, especially in the U.S., Europe, and Canada, perhaps because voting is less of a social occasion than it used to be.

**How could we redesign elections to reduce the disconnect between the duty to vote that people express, and the actual practice of voting that is somewhat on the decline?**

One of the clearest, most dramatic ways of increasing turnout is by making voting mandatory. There's a fair bit of research showing that, across the world, this has increased turnout more than any other kind of reform. Australia, for example, has compulsory voting that's well-enforced and effective. They have good voter registration, make it very easy to vote, get people out to the polls, and lower the material costs to voting.

Australia also has fines. If you don't show up to the polls, you'll receive a "Please Explain Letter" from the government. You're given the opportunity to send in an excuse—"My grandma was sick and I had to take care of her" or "I couldn't find a sitter for the kids." The people whose excuses aren't accepted or who choose not to respond to the letter are asked to pay the \$20 fine to the government.

You might think, "Well, \$20 isn't really that much." But compulsory voting laws, reinforced by the small fine, do send the signal that we as a community really think there is a duty to vote.

**If mandatory voting works in a country like Australia, which is not that dissimilar from the U.S., what are our objections to instituting such a policy?**

There are a couple of objections to mandatory voting. One is the view that we shouldn't force people to do things, if we can avoid it, even when a public good is at stake. Of course, there are ways to structure mandatory voting to make it minimally burdensome: keeping the fine relatively low; offering the opportunity to provide thoughtful excuses; even offering a conscientious abstainer status for those who object to the whole process.

Another alternative would be to provide a formal abstention or "none of the above" option on the ballot. I think that's an important alternative to the "stay at home" abstention that we have now, which is impossible to decipher: Are these people okay with how things are going, and don't care enough about politics to really get involved, or are they totally disengaged from the political process?

A second objection that people have to mandatory voting is the idea that it will introduce lots of less informed, less engaged people into the electorate. People who don't vote voluntarily often have lower levels of political knowledge and don't express as much interest in politics. The argument is that they will distort electoral outcomes by voting for worse candidates or dumbing down the political conversation.

The research on the relationship between compulsory voting and political knowledge has yielded mixed results in part because it's hard to know what kinds of knowledge and information are really relevant for people to participate in politics. It's also difficult to measure the effect of institutions across countries because there are all kinds of intervening cultural differences.

There is also evidence that compulsory voting is correlated with lower political inequality and less corruption. These are political outcomes that are more beneficial to the poor, the politically marginalized, people who are less likely to vote under voluntary systems. Low levels of political knowledge or political engagement are highly correlated with levels of education and wealth. The interests and concerns of those who are disadvantaged, marginalized, and excluded are going to be systematically different from the people who do vote.

Compulsory voting does help to interrupt a cycle of disengagement. Many people don't vote because they don't see the political system as being responsive to them or their needs. I think this is especially true for poor citizens, for the disadvantaged and marginalized, for minorities. To some extent they are right. Because compulsory voting enables people in those communities to count on others like them to vote, they have more of a reason to vote. When politicians know that they can expect turnout from poor and minority communities, they have good reason to address the concerns that these people have.

**Are there generational differences in the duty to vote? And if so why?**

There are generational differences in the belief that there's a duty to vote. It's hard to say whether these are generational effects—what everyone at a given life stage will experience—or whether they're cohort effects and unique to the current younger generation. There are certainly reasons to think that younger people are going to be less likely to vote in general,

whether it's in 2016 or the 1960s. That's in part because young people are more mobile and don't tend to have permanent addresses. And that trend is likely to continue. Same-day or automatic voter registration would reduce those barriers.

In terms of young people's political engagement in general, I think there are a lot of people who want to lump young people into a single group and say, "What's wrong with this generation? What's going on?" If we look at the young people who are really active and mobilized that can help us understand what we need to do to get younger generations involved. Young Latina and black women, for example, have been really politically active in the Black Lives Matter movement and on immigration issues around the DREAM Act. And there's the Democratic primaries and Bernie Sanders' campaign. That's an indication that youth voters actually care a lot about particular issues and actually are more policy motivated than people give them credit for.

I think it's really important to recognize that the kinds of issues that are going to be more salient to younger people often are not part of the political conversation in part because the people who are running for office are not experiencing them. The kinds of issues that are sort of unique to people at a certain stage in the late teens or late 20s, are things like how you get started in life and making the transition to adulthood. There's a lot of talk about college education and student loans. Those, I think are important, but that's just one among an array of concerns that people have in transitioning to adulthood, and thinking about how to get started in the job market.

Also think about how mobile young people are, the difficulty of establishing yourself in a community and creating social networks, and how precarious that situation is. I think it's often overlooked in part because of the view that everyone is going to grow out of that—that it's a stage of life that everyone experiences, and so there's no real unfairness in ignoring those issues, or just letting everyone deal with it. But it's definitely the case that how you fare at that early stage of adulthood has long-term effects for how people's lives go. It's also the case that because everyone experiences childhood, we certainly don't think that it's perfectly okay to neglect the concerns of children or just because almost everyone will experience old age, that it's okay to neglect the concerns of older people.

I think young people's concerns get neglected in part because they have difficulty entering the political arena. Again, there's a kind of vicious cycle where young people maybe aren't as involved because they perceive the political system as being less responsive to them, but precisely because they're not as involved, political leaders don't have as much of an incentive to be responsive to them. We have to think about how we can interrupt that cycle.✱

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